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NIC, area employers should be partners

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Supply and demand.

Those are three magic words that will help guide all travelers up the slippery slope of the latest educational debate between North Idaho College and interested observers throughout the region.

Here are three more: Communication. Understanding. Teamwork.

In an effort to embrace the first three words, several economic development-minded leaders used the latter three as the centerpiece of a recent meeting with legislators and members of NIC's administration. The meeting was not open to the public or the media. It was intended to encourage open, blunt discussion of what NIC is doing, how that's meeting or not meeting the needs of the community, and where the relationship can be improved for the betterment of all.

For the most part, the discussion was constructive. A few myths were debunked; some complexities were further obfuscated. Still, most participants felt progress had been made, and that the gap between what NIC offers and what employers need could be significantly narrowed.

We believe that NIC in general and its superb workforce training and professional-technical programs specifically are poised to help North Idaho continue its economic growth. We know for certain this must happen, because eventually, we're all going to live in expensive housing that requires of its inhabitants high wages and good benefits. And we're not there yet.

But we may be closer than we thought. Good jobs are out there, we're learning, but good prospects aren't always getting the training that's needed to fill those jobs.

To accomplish that goal, employers must effectively communicate their needs -- today's and tomorrow's -- to NIC so that the supply will be plentiful. And NIC needs to listen and respond to the best of its ability.

One case in point: If you've tried to schedule an appointment to get your teeth cleaned lately, you may have been told that the shortage of dental hygienists has some patients waiting several months for a simple cleaning. NIC says state law requires a certified dentist to oversee the program, and that it's not feasible to hire a dentist when only a dozen students at \$2,000 a year can be trained at one time.

We're positive that if the dental community and NIC work together on this issue, a dental hygiene program is possible. And that's something we could all smile about.

Good things will happen as long as political posturing and misinformation spreading aren't allowed. Personal agendas and past peeves should take a back seat so we can all benefit from a better-educated, better-equipped citizenry and workforce.